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## The SS-9 argument

By Joseph C. Harsch

Americans are being treated these days to an unusually graphic example of why it is difficult for the ordinary citizen to know just what or whom to believe about the present state of the "Soviet menace."

In this case we mean a very specific form of "the menace," the present likelihood, or unlikelihood, that the Soviets are reaching for the quick deployment of a super-weapon which would suddenly put them well ahead of the United States in nuclear fire power.

This round began on March 7, when Sen. Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Washington declared that the Russians were deploying a new generation of nuclear weapons and called it "ominous."

Those who have followed this and subsequent events closely know that what the senator said was based on information given to a Senate committee in presumed secrecy. This included the fact that the Russians were then digging holes larger than those used for their super SS-9 intercontinental missiles. The SS-9 has a warhead with an estimated yield of 20 to 25 megatons, by far the biggest known to be in existence. America's old (1962 vintage) Titan II has an estimated 5 to 10 megaton yield.

The implication of the senator's disclosure of classified information was that the Russians were moving into a new, heavier-yield range of weapons well ahead of the United States.

Subsequently Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and other Defense Department spokesmen have spoken of Soviet deployment of a new and larger weapon and implied in various degrees that this represents something definitely "new" in kind and quality.

Everything, of course, turns on whether what the Soviets are doing is new in kind and quality.

If they are actually deploying something well ahead of what the United States has in hand, then something ominous has happened and there is indeed cause for alarm, and an excuse for a crash program in building a new generation of American weapons to restore the balance.

But if what they are doing is not new, the story is quite different.

There have been many intervening episodes in this continuing story since March 7, but for our purposes we jump now to the May 23 issue of the New York Times which attributes to Republican sources on Capitol Hill a report that latest CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) information is that the new holes are not designed for a new weapon after all but for hardened silos for a familiar SS-11.

This SS-11 is a 1966 vintage weapon with a one to two megaton yield. This puts it in the same yield category as the American Minutemen I and II.

If this is true we are dealing with a very different and very much less "ominous" matter than a totally new Russian weapons system.

Instead of a super SS-9 this would be one more example of the Russians trying to catch up with an American lead.

The biggest yield American weapon, the Titan II, was 1962 vintage. The Russians deployed their super SS-9 four years later, in 1966. But in the meantime the United States had gone over to the Minuteman of only a one megaton yield. The Russians followed with their lower megaton SS-11 a year later, and a still lower one, the SS-13, in 1968.

Now, the latest report is that what they are doing is trying to protect their 1963 vintage weapons from the American deployment of MIRVs by putting them into bigger holes with an extra concrete liner for better protection.

In 1968, the then Secretary of the Air Force, Harold Brown, told a Senate committee:

"The Soviets, four or five years after which we did each of the following things, also did them. They dispersed their silos, they hardened them, they put in the equivalent of BEMWs to warn their bombers. They built nuclear submarines, with ballistic missiles launch capability."

This writer is not in a position to state that this definitely is another case where the Russians are in fact still four or five years behind and trying hard to catch up. The CIA declines to speak in public.

Journalists must depend on what other people who have access to CIA reports tell us about those reports.

And the sad fact is that these second-hand versions of CIA information are sometimes shaped to suit the speaker's wishes and are frequently in conflict.

One can say that reports of the Russians having gone far ahead of the United States have so far always proved to be false, but frequently only after the United States has pushed on to the next weapon, which the Russians then have to match.

One can guess that the Russians are still about five years behind.

And this, it seems, is the reason President Nixon could be so cheerful the other day about prospects for agreement in the SALT talks. He has everything to gain, nothing to lose, by a freeze on nuclear weapons at present levels. He is ahead. Hence he can afford to make just enough of a concession to induce the Russians to call off a race which is stretching their resources without recovery without.

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## Alas, Poor Bumblebee

The ways of the "defense intelligence community" are puzzling to laymen — but certainly no more so than those of scientists who dabble in defense policy.

✓ Making the rounds in Washington is the report that the Central Intelligence Agency differs with the Pentagon on the purpose of some 60 new missile silos under construction in Russia and detected by U.S. reconnaissance satellites.

The Pentagon has said repeatedly in recent months the silos are for the monster Soviet SS9 intercontinental missile, and represented an increased Russian first-strike threat to the U.S. But the CIA, according to reports, says most of them are for the smaller SS11, and are simply a "hardening" of missile sites, which indicates a defensive rather than a first-strike strategy.

The latter theory was used by a group called the Strategic Weapons Committee of the Federation of America Scientists in arguing for massive defense spending cuts before the Senate Appropriations Committee the other day.

The scientists can scarcely be blamed for being confused by the differing views of the intelligence experts, but it was the other lines

of reasoning they followed before the Senate committee that might make laymen dizzy.

Don't build the Safeguard defense system, they said, because the Russians have so many missiles it would be useless anyway.

Don't build the B-1 super-bomber, they urged, because it's only slightly better than the obsolescent B52s now in service.

And don't build a better missile submarine than the present Polaris-Poseidon models because while these are virtually invulnerable today, nobody knows what threat to their survival may be developed.

It's futile to improve those of our weapons which are virtually non-existent, those which are inadequate, and those which are invulnerable, the scientists seem to be saying.

In view of this "the bumblebee can't possibly fly" type of reasoning, we are surprised the Federation didn't conclude its chorus of pessimism by telling us whether President Nixon and Congress should invite the Kremlin to take over our rule forthwith, offer to pay tribute in exchange for letting them remain in power, or simply go into hiding in anticipation of an inevitable Russian take-over.